

## Freedom Is Coming (or Glory Hallelujah, Change My Name)

I Samuel 2:1-11; Ezekiel 36:22-28; John 1:43-51

Given January 18 at Union Church of Bay Ridge, ©2009 Rev. Mary B. Speers, Pastor

“No wonder Jesus was a radical,” said the Old Testament professor, “His mother sang him protest songs for lullabies.” That’s Walter Brueggeman, talking about the Magnificat of Mary, or in our Call to Worship today, the Song of Hannah, which sounds a lot like the Song of Mary, and as you remember from Advent, was what was in the minds of Luke’s hearers when they heard the song of Mary. That’s right: Mary’s song was influenced by the Song of Hannah in the Old Testament. Unsearchable, the mind of God, to come to earth as the child of such a mother! Singing songs about changing the world!

So today I would like to talk about influences: who we follow, how the song they sing becomes our song, and then, this Martin Luther King Sunday and eve of the most momentous inauguration since...well, ever!—dare even to look with you into the future.

Wikipedia lists influences on people, and right there at the top of the list for Martin Luther King Jr. it says, “Jesus Christ.” Ten years ago, most kids in public school had no clue, when they heard about Dr. King, that the Civil Rights Movement got its power and its base from the Black church, as well as its rhetoric, its themes (the Passover story, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible) and its music (we are singing some of those songs today). But, top of the list (and here’s why they didn’t talk about it in public schools), Dr. King followed Jesus.

Now in Wikipedia there are some things about Martin Luther King Jr. that I didn’t know, or had forgotten, and besides the scandals that have been dealt with and are better off forgotten, there are some really interesting and good influences that ought to be remembered, so I’m going to share them with you, starting with ...*I told Jesus it would be all right if he changed my name....*

First, did you remember that Martin Luther King Jr. was the son of a preacher, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. But more than that, both of them started out Michael King, Sr. and Jr., until father took son on a trip to Germany in, of all times, 1934. Well, Michael Sr. was so impressed with Martin Luther (and if you read the 95 Theses, they’re one long protest song, right out of the Prophets and the sternest words of John the Baptist and Jesus, one long call to the church, to Christian stewardship and Biblical social and economic justice), so impressed with the example of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Martin Luther, and how he must have appeared in stark contrast to what was going on in Germany in 1934, that Michael Sr. changed his name, and that of Little Michael, aged five, to Martin Luther King, Senior and Junior. If little Michael/Martin was five years old, that’s old enough to remember, and old enough to have an opinion: old enough, in other words, to change it back, if that’s what he’d wanted to do. So even at age five, he must have participated in the choice to change his name.

When we choose to follow Jesus, it’s a life-changing experience. If you’re going into a convent, or being baptized in many cultures, you take a new name, a name, usually, of someone whose life you want to imitate.

And it was certainly a life-changing experience for Martin Luther King, Jr. Like most

preachers' kids, the last thing in the world he wanted to be was a preacher, until he got called to do it. He was going to be a scholar, a lawyer, anything but a preacher, anything besides having to go back to the South and a congregation in the South, and have to set a good example and get people to do things they didn't want to have to do. But God had other plans, and Martin Jr. was tapped on the shoulder to be a leader in what would become the Civil Rights Movement, starting with his call to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and to lead the growing resistance to segregation that would become the bus boycott in that city.

*"Jesus told me I would have to live humble if he changed my name...."* The second influence on Dr. King is Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi. There were a lot of similarities between the two. Both were highly intelligent, highly educated outside their own culture, Gandhi in South Africa and England, and King in Boston, and both heard a strong call to return as liberators to their own people. Both were controversial to the point of being assassinated; and both brought to the attention of the world the power and discipline of nonviolent resistance to oppression—the power we feel in Jesus when we relive the Passion of the Lord each Holy Week.

*"Jesus told me that the world would be 'gainst me, if he changed my name..."* Now here's something I didn't know before. The third influence on Dr King, the man who introduced him to Gandhi, to the principles of nonviolent protest, who persuaded him to get rid of all the guns he had in the house at the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, the guns that Coretta King said didn't make her feel any safer, this man who is generally known to have been the architect of the 1963 March on Washington, where Dr King delivered his immortal "I Have a Dream" speech, but whose name is kept quiet because his whole life long—and he was 17 years older than Dr King, born in 1912—he lived openly as a gay man, was Bayard Rustin.

A birthright Quaker, high school football hero, friend of labor, conscientious objector to World War II, recorded singer, lover of theater and costumes of all sorts, and by all accounts the best organizer and one of the best social-issues debaters of the twentieth century, Rustin lived a life truly devoted to peacemaking: "If you want peace, work for justice," would have been his motto: justice and equal dignity for all, true *shalom*.

Really, Dr. King would probably have said that Rustin was Moses the organizer, and Dr. King was Aaron the orator. There's a documentary about Rustin's life, *Brother Outsider*, which I would love for us to watch together as we study peace this Lent. Like Dr King, he was no saint, and there were mistakes in his past that some tried to use to discredit his message, but it's his message, and his methods, that prevail in our memories, the songs we sing and the signposts we follow.

*"But I told Jesus it would be all right if he changed my name...."* And do you hear them then, almost a counterpoint to that old African American spiritual of change and commitment, do you hear coming closer the far-off strains of that freedom song, did Gandhi hear it, I wonder, there in South Africa...did that little big-eared, biracial baby Barry Obama hear it, in Hawaii, or Indonesia or Kansas or Kenya or the South Side of Chicago....*"Freedom is coming, Freedom is coming, Freedom is coming, oh yes I know...(oh! Jesus is coming....)"*

Jesus is coming, and the cynics say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Can anything

good come out of Detroit? Can anything good come out of Wall Street?

Can anything good come out of...New York? Look at what they're calling the Miracle of Flight 1549 this week. On MSNBC, Rachel Maddow said, "as we did so tragically on 9/11, we saw that amazing thing about New Yorkers: when they see danger, they actually run *toward* it, looking for ways to help." Can anything good come out of...foreigners? Just look at who did the actual rescuing: people from the Spanish Caribbean, from Africa, from Asia. New Yorkers.

Can anything good come out of...Washington? My sisters and brothers, we are about to find out. We are about to have a truly different president who campaigned on change, whose very person embodies the future lifeblood of America, whose election signals the most profound transformation, and willingness to be transformed, this country has ever known.

Can it really happen? If we are part of it. Can it be painless? Probably not. But is this a president we can at least want to believe in, someone whose influences we trust and whose call we can follow? That is our decision, and I sense from most of you that whomever you voted for, you are willing to give this new government its best chance for success.

Can anything good come out of the Presbyterian Church? My brothers and sisters, yes it can. The denomination voted last June to remove all barriers to following the call of Christ to service in the church, in the language of our Book of Order, "not related to profession of faith." Union Church has been living this anyway, and in response, our session recently led us to become the twentieth member church of Presbyterian Welcome, our regional association of inclusive churches. Bill Tolley, and all your pastors going right back to John Paul Jones, would be proud of us—I know for a fact that Jo Tolley and Peggy Howland are!

So (here's a sneak preview), on March 1, the first Sunday of Lent, Rev. Mieke Vandersall will join us to give us the Communion chalice that Presbyterian Welcome gives to all its member churches. We'll have a special song by our elder Mary Cusack, and a reprise of the gospel anthem we're introducing today, which Vince and I (and Katie!) have been wanting to bring to Union Church ever since we sang it together in the Rainbow Revival at General Assembly....just to come full circle...*Jesus, Give us Your Peace...oh freedom is coming, freedom is coming...Jesus is coming...oh yes, I know...* Well, this new vote, like the last one, needs to be ratified. There's work to be done. But the record shows, unequivocally, thanks to Bayard Rustin, that Martin Luther King Jr. himself would be proud of us.

Now, and here's the last one, I promise: Can anything good come out of what I say to you today? Weren't Barack and Michelle Obama following Dr. King, and Martin Luther, and Ghandi, and Bayard Rustin, and most importantly, Jesus, in calling us this Martin Luther King Day, this day before the Inauguration of a lifetime, to a Day On? To begin as we know we must go on: "*we are climbing Jacob's ladder....gonna lay my burden down?*"

If you like, and if you can, come with me from 11 to 2 tomorrow for a Day On with our sister Church of Gethsemane, bring your canned goods, your extra hats, gloves, scarves, mittens, your songs, and your creative hands. We'll sing, share, and make an Acts of Kindness banner; all lay our burdens down, chip in for pizza, and have a good time together. If tomorrow you are going to work,

how about doing what Lynn Penney is doing: organizing a canned goods drive during the lunch hour, or pledging your office to go home and collect all your old coats?

Would Jesus call us to a Weekend at Disney World? Not that Jesus, or I, or the Obamas, or Martin Luther King Jr., or anyone else, has anything against family vacations: Martin Luther had five children, and Jesus—well, remember him having fun with his friends when he should have been being earnest and worthy?—but Martin Luther King Day was never meant to be another football or ski or beach or Disney World weekend.

It was meant to be a day to commemorate the contribution of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the heart, soul—indeed, the very life of this nation, when God, even for a moment, took away our heart of stone and gave us a heart of flesh, and none of us has ever been the same since. And what's the best way to honor someone you love who has died? That's right, it's not to sit around just talking about how great they were, it's to get up, get going, and in their name, *to do the things they did*.

*I told Jesus it would be all right if I changed my name...He told me I would have to get humble, he told me the world would be 'gainst me, but I told Jesus it would be all right if he changed my name...(oh freedom, oh freedom...oh freedom is coming, oh yes I know...)*

So, my friends, I invite you to follow our leaders, as it says in the old ordination charge of the Presbyterian church, "as we see them following the Lord." Shall we let Jesus change our name? Shall we really?

And sure enough, I see a whole parade, that Gospel train, don't you? Think of that old newsreel footage of the Mall and the Lincoln Memorial, following Dr. King, following Marian Anderson, following Rosa Parks, following Martin Luther, following Gandhi, following Bayard Rustin, a whole host in Washington and all over this great country and indeed the world...following Jesus, because the best way to honor someone you look up to is to do the things they did. And as a couple of us greeted one another last Presbytery meeting: Yes we can! Yes we did! ...and ohhh!—Great God Almighty! now we're going to have to!

AMEN.